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Seymour Fox
with
William Novak

VISION AT THE HEART

Lessons From Camp Ramah
On The Power Of Ideas
In Shaping
Educational Institutions



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in Jewish
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Mandel Institute

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CIJE works in partnership with Jewish communities, institutions and denominations to make outstanding Jewish education a continental priority.

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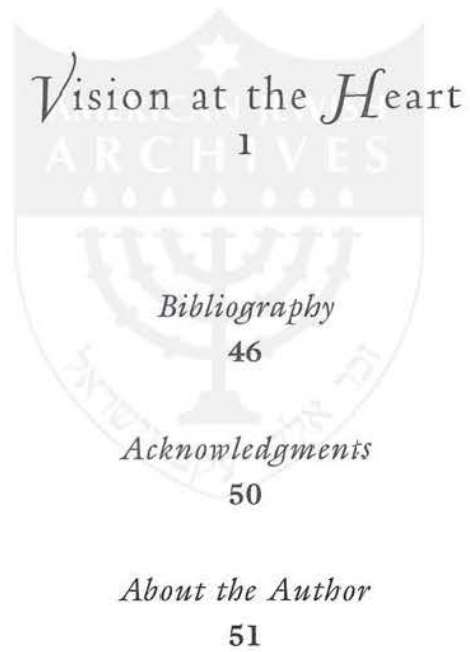
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VISION AT THE HEART

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Introduction

There is nothing as practical as a great idea.

Many of us, if we are fortunate, have at some point in our lives been part of an unforgettable educational experience—a school, a summer program, an outstanding teacher—that has touched our souls or perhaps even changed our lives. We look back on such moments with gratitude and awe, and with the hope that others—our friends, our colleagues, and especially our children—will be exposed to similar experiences that offer inspiration and purpose.

What does it take to create these kinds of experiences? While Camp Ramah is only one example, it has been a prominent and powerful one ever since its founding by Dr. Moshe Davis and Sylvia Ettenberg of the Teachers Institute at the Jewish Theological Seminary. The idea for Ramah gained acceptance in 1946, and the first Ramah camp opened in Wisconsin in the summer of 1947. Fifty years

later, there are nineteen overnight and day camps in North America, Israel, South America, and Russia.

Ramah emerged out of an ambitious dream, a carefully considered ideal of educational possibilities. Big questions were asked: What kind of Jews, what kind of people do we want to nurture? What ideas will guide this new camp? What happens when compelling but competing philosophies about the meaning and purpose of Jewish life must coexist within one institution? How should Ramah address the various convictions, controversies, and anxieties prevalent among North American Jews? How can Judaism be transmitted to children and to teenagers as vital, engaging — and necessary?

We live in a time when the Jewish community is searching for ways to revitalize existing institutions and to build new ones, ranging from community high schools to informal educational settings for adults. What can we learn about the centrality of vision to the excellence of an educational institution? How can the experience of Ramah illuminate contemporary efforts to transform Jewish life in North America through education?

Seymour Fox, a central figure in Jewish education, was instrumental in developing Ramah from philosophy to practice.

The Need for Vision

You've made the claim that every educational initiative should be guided by a clear and well-developed vision. But what may seem self-evident to you is not necessarily obvious to everyone. What makes you willing to allocate so much time and energy to what some people might view as an introductory or preliminary step in the creation of a new enterprise?

If you begin a new project with serious ideas and lofty ideals, some people will criticize you for being grandiose or for "too much thinking." And it is true that in the normal course of events you will invariably fall short of your carefully thought-out vision. That is the way of the world: If you start with cognac, you'll be lucky to end up with grape juice. But that's not a bad result when you consider the alternative — if you *start* with grape juice, you'll probably end up with Kool-Aid!

Let me put it another way. Education that is essentially *pareve* — that's neutral and doesn't take a strong stand — has little chance of succeeding. In my experience, all effective education has at its foundation a distinct and well-considered vision. The proof of that proposition is all around us. A few years ago, Dr. Marshall S. Smith, the current U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education, wrote a paper analyzing the many attempts to reform American schools during the 1980s. He found that despite a great deal of new legislation and the expenditure of huge sums of money from both public and private sources, very little had actually improved. Among the few exceptions were those schools and institutions with a clear and substantial vision.

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, made a similar point in her 1983 book,

The Good High School. In an attempt to discover “what works,” she visited and analyzed six well-regarded American secondary schools, of which two were urban, two were suburban, and two were “elite.” She found that each of these schools had a distinct vision, and that the attempt to realize that vision was precisely what motivated the headmaster and the staff. In some of the schools, the concerns of teachers, administrators, and students were easy to identify because they were articulated explicitly; in others, the “repetitive refrains” and “persistent themes” were expressed in more subtle and indirect ways. But whether the visions that animated these schools were loudly proclaimed or quietly whispered, they were present in each of these institutions.

Another book from the mid-1980s, *The Shopping Mall High School* (by Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David Cohen), examines the other side of the coin — that is, what happens when you maintain a school *without* a clear vision. In most American high schools, almost everything is available in small doses, and everything tends to have the same weight, the same ranking. The authors contend that in trying to anticipate every possible need and desire that a student or parent might have, these schools have turned into the academic equivalent of shopping malls.

“Both types of institution,” they write, “are profoundly consumer-oriented. Both try to hold customers by offering something for everyone. Individual stores or departments, and salespeople or teachers, try their best to attract customers by advertisements of various sorts, yet in the end the customer has the final word.”

In other words, if you offer everything, you stand for nothing. Or, as the authors conclude in an understatement, contemporary high schools “take few stands on what is educationally or morally important.”

Does this mean that vision is a tough sell?

Yes, but it's getting easier. Five or ten years ago you had to convince people about the importance of vision, but today the idea is increasingly accepted — if only because we've all seen what happens in its absence. There is a professor at Stanford University who argues that in the business world, vision is even more important than leadership. He claims that if a company has a clear vision, and that vision becomes part of the culture and is internalized, the company can survive periods of weak leadership or even a move toward control by the bureaucracy. I believe this is true of educational institutions as well.

Anyone can claim that a particular idea constitutes a vision, so let's take a moment to establish what an educational vision is — and what it isn't.

A vision is a vibrant entity. It's a portrait of ideal human beings shaped by education — an image rich and exciting enough to guide your future choices. A vision is inspired by your belief about human possibility, while being influenced by your experience of human fallibility.

An educational vision must be able to answer certain questions: What kind of people will graduate from this school, camp, or other educational setting? What will they understand and believe? How will they behave? What will they know how to do? In what ways will they be able to contribute to the community? And what qualities, intrinsic to your vision, will enable them to keep growing and learning?

Vision, then, is inherently both dynamic and flexible. It is not a mission statement or a declaration of purpose, which often end up as frozen, static assertions. And a vision is more than a goal. Goals are important, but they are specific to a particular

educational setting, or even a specific class or text. You might have one goal for teaching science and another for the study of Talmud. Out of your vision will flow a series of goals for educators, parents, community leaders, and students, who will apply or translate that vision into concrete programs.

A great vision will inspire educators to creativity and even to the invention of new kinds of institutions. Goals certainly matter, but by themselves they're not sufficient. And they are often so pedantic as to leave no room for vision. A vision that is intelligent and worthwhile is guided by great ideas that will survive periods when those ideas are out of favor. In philosophy, for example, trends come and go, but you still find Platonists in every generation.

I would add that it's often easier to inspire people if you're presenting them with a vision that is essentially extremist or fanatic, that depicts the world in stark, well-defined, black-and-white polarities. The challenge is to inspire them with a vision that includes a commitment to concepts such as religious tolerance, pluralism, and democracy.

Visions in General Education

Let's look at some specific visions in American education.

John Dewey has been on my mind of late because I've been reading Alan Ryan's book, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*. Although Dewey did most of his significant writing during the 1920s and 1930s, there's a renewed interest in him and his ideas today, just as I believe that in the Jewish world we will soon see a similar renewal of interest in the ideas of Mordecai Kaplan, who viewed himself as a student of Dewey.

Dewey had a vision of the world as ever changing, as people continually tried to modify themselves and their environment. He believed the best way to approach such a world was through rational efforts at perceiving problems and inventing solutions. Dewey had an unlimited optimism about what could be achieved by the combined powers of science and the intellect, and his vision led to a revolution in American education.

Today, it is difficult to appreciate just how significant a place he occupied in American culture. On the first page of his book, Ryan quotes the eminent historian Henry Steele Commager, who observed that “for a generation no issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken.”

Dewey’s followers took many of the ideas he wrote about and applied them to practice. The same is true of the followers of the spiritual philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who established hundreds of Waldorf schools across the country. To this day, his followers discuss every issue, down to what color to paint the walls in order to achieve a particular result that is part of Steiner’s vision. Whenever you have a vision that excites and inspires people, they continually ask themselves what it would take to translate it into practice.

Another example of a successful vision is the one developed at the University of Chicago. Robert Maynard Hutchins led the school during the 1930s and 1940s, but his influence endures to this day. His vision had to do with the centrality of great ideas, which in turn generated the Great Books movement. Over the years, Chicago has probably produced more Nobel Prize winners and university presidents than any other institution of higher learning. It was a uniquely dynamic place that was guided by a vision, and it has remained a great center of intellectual excitement.

Visions in Jewish Education

And in the Jewish world?

Any number of important visions have influenced Jewish education over the years, and many of them have been directed, either explicitly or implicitly, at the larger Jewish world. Maimonides wanted to prepare young people for a society that would reflect his concept of Judaism, in which the intellect played a central role. Centuries later, in a very different era, the modern Zionists believed that to create a new, vibrant society in the Jewish homeland, you had to educate a new type of individual.

One of the most important family dynasties in Jewish education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that of the Brisker Rav of Lithuania, whose descendants include the Soloveitchiks. The followers of the Brisker Rav established a network of important and influential yeshivot. In some cases, they deliberately chose to teach and study texts that other rabbis felt were impractical, such as the sections on animal sacrifices or the regulations pertaining to the Temple in Jerusalem. Most other yeshivot in those days concentrated on sections of the Talmud that were more immediately applicable — texts that dealt with topics such as civil damages, marriage and divorce, the rituals of prayer — cases of Jewish law that you could actually *use*.

But the Brisker Rav's followers insisted that to ignore the more esoteric sections of the Talmud was to miss the point. As they saw it, the classical texts constituted a coherent system. If you omitted certain sections, you were not only in danger of distorting the tradition; you were also liable to overlook some great treasures. Who is to say where you will find the most significant ideas? One cannot presume to know where the highest wisdom lies.

Another major nineteenth-century educational reform movement was the Musar movement, with its emphasis on *mitzvot ben adam l'chavero* [the commandments pertaining to interpersonal relations]. The Musarists introduced a serious concentration on moral and spiritual issues into the yeshiva world of Lithuania. In most yeshivot, Musar [ethics] had been considered “soft,” unworthy of significant attention. But in the late nineteenth century, the followers of Rabbi Israel Salanter developed entire institutions that emphasized Musar. They believed that the exclusive emphasis on *pilpul* [the concentration on subtle, legal, conceptual differences] in most yeshivot could lead to a distortion of Judaism and the inability of the students to develop sufficient social and ethical sensitivities. The Musarists were reacting to a world they viewed as both excessively intellectual and insufficiently concerned with morality and personal responsibility.

Their opponents countered that the Musarists were demeaning the power of the text, which in itself contained the power to affect people’s behavior. But over time the Musarists prevailed, and their influence penetrated most of the Lithuanian yeshivot.

The Vision of Ramah

Let’s jump forward a few decades and take a close look at an important Jewish educational institution in which you were intimately involved: Camp Ramah. In the late 1940s, the founders of Ramah could have invested their energies in any number of projects. Why a summer camp?

Ramah was a response to problems that Jewish education had to confront in the years following World War II — problems that we still face today. First, most Jewish children were not being exposed to meaningful Jewish experiences during their

early, formative years. Second, most Jewish families did not significantly contribute to the Jewish education of their children. Third, most North American Jews didn't live in an environment that supported the values of Judaism. In an era when children of immigrants were busily trying to become Americans, the Jewish character of most Jewish homes was declining. The founders of Ramah wanted to go beyond what a school could achieve. By trying to create a special enclave, an entire subculture, they sought to accomplish what the family and the community were no longer willing or able to do.

We wanted to create an educational setting where young people would be able to discover their Judaism and learn how to live it in their daily lives. We hoped this would nurture Jews who were both deeply committed to their tradition and actively involved in American society.

Why a camp? Because even the best school operates only part of the day. We wanted to create a real and total society that would respond to the whole person, twenty-four hours a day, even though we could maintain that society for no more than eight weeks at a time. Within that framework, which would include daily classes for every camper, our aims could be educational in the broadest sense — not only teaching Hebrew, but grappling with all kinds of social concerns: How should counselors treat campers? How should the drama coach react when a child misses his cue during a performance? Because Ramah was a round-the-clock society, our basic source, often explicitly, was a vibrant, living *halakhah*.

Take the inevitable conflict between competence and compassion. It's good to improve your baseball skills, and it's wonderful to win the game, but when you're striving for excellence people sometimes get hurt. You have to draw a line between the

need to win, or to excel, and a concern for people's feelings. Whether it was sports, or the arts, or Hebrew, our goal was to lower the possibility for hurt without seriously compromising the aspiration for excellence. The phrase "not living up to his/her potential" was heard often, which led to a measure of disequilibrium in the lives of the campers. There was an emphasis on ethics and caring — but also on growth. Ramah was not a laid-back place.

The founders of Ramah could have invested their energy in a cluster of day schools. Ultimately they chose camping, because the issues that they believed needed to be addressed could not be addressed by a school, not even a day school. Among other limitations, a school isn't the best place to nurture a child's Jewish emotional development. The challenge of Ramah was to educate the entire child — including his or her mind. We wanted to pay equal attention to emotional and spiritual issues, and to the articulation and living out of Jewish values.

The Jewish Ideas behind Ramah

It's generally known that Ramah's Jewish vision was guided by the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary. But who were these scholars, and what, exactly, did they contribute?

I would start with Professor Louis Finkelstein, who was the primary figure in Conservative Judaism during Ramah's early years. He was president of the Seminary during the 1940s, when Ramah was established, and chancellor during the 1950s and 1960s, when the camps flourished. He believed the Talmud embodied a great ethical message, a message that spoke not only to Jews but to the larger society as well. In 1951, he was featured in a *Time* Magazine cover story as the leader of a

Jewish renaissance in America. In 1958, Dr. Finkelstein even wrote an article on business ethics for *Fortune Magazine* as a result of a meeting with Henry Luce, the magazine's founder, who had called him in to discuss the negative image of Jews and Judaism in the business world.

Above all, Dr. Finkelstein relished the opportunity to apply Talmudic principles to the issues raised by living in a modern American society. During the McCarthy hearings, he actually wanted to be summoned to testify. He wanted to tell the Committee: "I will not answer you, because you have no right to question me this way. America is based on the ideal of human dignity. In our tradition, we also have a conception of human dignity. Parts of it are delineated in the volume *Sanhedrin* of the Talmud in a concept known as *drishah v'chakirah*, which deals with how you may question a witness. And you cannot interrogate an individual in this manner."

This was an essential Finkelsteinian response: Americans are sensitive to the Bible, and the Jewish interpretation of the Bible ought to become part of the public discourse. Dr. Finkelstein wanted Jews to compete in the American marketplace of ideas from within their own tradition, especially with regard to ethics and social behavior. He once said that we Jews have been living on top of a volcano from the very beginning of our history, and we therefore had a great deal to offer a world that was beginning to understand that now we were *all* living on top of a volcano.

In postwar America, Dr. Finkelstein was viewed as a sage who spoke out of a long and venerable tradition. He delivered the invocation at President Eisenhower's inauguration, and Eisenhower used to consult with him surprisingly often on ethical matters. One of Finkelstein's proudest achievements was the Seminary's Conferences on Science, Philosophy and

Religion, where many individuals from a variety of world views and traditions would address a single theme, such as peace or equality. Louis Finkelstein's most significant influence on Ramah was his passion to create educated Jews who were active and responsible citizens.



Next, I would cite the great Talmudic scholar Professor Saul Lieberman and his emphasis on the close and careful study of Jewish texts. When the first Ramah camp opened in 1947, people were incredulous: "You're establishing a summer camp that includes *classes*?" In those days, young people went to camp to get *away* from classes, although there were some prominent exceptions, such as the Interlochen camps for students with exceptional musical talent. It was only much later that summer camps were established for the study of science or computers.

In effect, we were running a school within the camp, complete with its own educational director and staff. The daily classes were mostly text-based, and it was quite possible to spend a large part of the summer on just a few verses. Teaching was considered a full-time job, and the teachers were not given other duties, although multiple tasks would have made more sense economically. They therefore had ample time to prepare for class and were available after classes to any camper who might seek them out.

At Ramah we believed in exposing ideas to critique and inquiry rather than presenting them dogmatically. We never sought intellectual obedience. A common question the Talmud asks is: *Minah hani mili?* How do you know? The risk, of course, is that students will pose this same question about the central assumptions of religious belief. How do you *know* there's a God? How do you *know* God or Moses wrote the Torah? One must allow these questions, and all questions, while recognizing

that a tradition that encourages difficult questions will every now and then produce a Spinoza, an Einstein, or a Freud, who will operate outside of the system.

The main purpose of text study at Ramah was to uncover the basic ideas of Judaism, which isn't always a simple proposition. In those days, the Seminary didn't allow the Five Books of Moses to be taught in the Rabbinical School because they would have to be studied critically and scientifically. Biblical criticism was so rife with controversy, especially the issue of the authorship of the Five Books of Moses, that the Seminary responded by avoiding the study of these texts entirely. The Prophets? Fine. But not the Torah.

Meanwhile, at Ramah we were experimenting with the curriculum on Genesis that was prepared by the Melton Center for Research in Jewish Education. (The Melton Center was founded in 1960 at the Seminary; among its activities was a program to develop a new curriculum for the teaching of Bible in Jewish supplementary schools.) To a considerable extent, Ramah served as a testing ground for Melton material. This material, which included Professor Nahum Sarna's important book *Understanding Genesis*, argued that whether or not the Biblical text was divine in origin, it contained profound ethical and religious messages.

In the early 1960s, the volume on Genesis was in galleys, but we still didn't have official approval to use it. I went to see Professor Lieberman — not because I had to, but because it would have been irresponsible not to check with the Seminary synagogue's rabbi, who was officially responsible for the interpretation of Jewish law at the Seminary. I took with me a report on the social studies program of the Westchester public schools, where the students were being taught to distinguish among "science"

(meaning The Truth), “philosophy” (meaning True Ideas), and “religion” (meaning, in this context, myths and legends).

“This is what we’re up against,” I told Professor Lieberman, “and this is why we’re publishing our book on Genesis. Whether or not the reader regards the Torah as being divine in origin, we are demonstrating that it offers an enormously important ethical and religious message.”

At the time, much of the Seminary’s theological position was roughly equivalent to what you might find today in some quarters of modern Orthodoxy. Ramah, however, was willing to take risks in order to achieve its educational goals, and the Seminary faculty was generally sympathetic to those needs.



Another important influence was Professor Mordecai Kaplan’s view of Judaism as a civilization. He defined God as “power that makes for salvation.” He wanted to reconstruct traditional Jewish theological ideas so as to transform them from an otherworldly conception to a personal and social this-worldly conception of salvation. He was seen as a heretic by some of his Seminary colleagues, who regarded his views as a demythologization of God. Some of Kaplan’s colleagues believed that he was essentially a sociologist who had wandered off into theology. As the story goes, Kaplan replied that if the Seminary greats, especially Louis Ginsberg and Saul Lieberman, had dealt with theological questions, he would have left them alone; but their failure to address these issues forced him to attempt to fill the vacuum.

Kaplan joined the centuries-old conversation between Judaism and the great philosophers. He wanted Judaism to be in constant relationship with the world around it, and he brought the elements of music, art, and drama into central focus as legitimate religious concerns and expressions.



At the other end of the spectrum, Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel's religious vision was a major influence on Ramah. Dr. Heschel believed that Jewish rituals and symbols embodied a deep and profound message about the way human beings should live. He viewed Shabbat as a great gift to the world, a sanctification of time in a society where that sanctity was continually being violated. Heschel was amazed, for example, when the dates of certain American holidays were shifted merely for the convenience of having them coincide with a three-day weekend. "Can you imagine changing Rosh Hashanah so that it always falls on a weekend?" he asked.

For Heschel, prayer was the way for an individual to make contact with his innermost self. The whole question of what *t'fillah* [prayer] meant at Ramah was deeply influenced by Heschel and his students, including the concept of *kavannah* [devotional intention] and the idea of *t'fillah* as an opportunity for contemplation and self-improvement. But Heschel was also very concerned about the role of religion in the larger world. He marched in Selma with Martin Luther King as an expression of his own religious tradition. He believed that the most profound ideas in Judaism speak directly to contemporary social and political concerns.



Finally, there was Professor Hillel Bavli, a poet and professor of Hebrew literature. Dr. Bavli functioned as a kind of watchdog who made sure we really were using enough Hebrew at Ramah — no easy task. All of us believed that if you wanted to understand and be part of Jewish history, you had no choice but to master Hebrew; that was how you joined the ongoing conversation with Rashi, Maimonides, and all the other great

commentators and philosophers. Hebrew was also a vital link to the State of Israel, although it must be acknowledged that Finkelstein wasn't a Zionist at first, and neither was I.

After years of success, it may be difficult to appreciate what an outrageous idea it was at the time to try to run a Conservative movement summer camp in Hebrew. Camp Massad was doing it, of course, but Hebrew and Zionism *were* Massad's religion. In the Conservative movement, which was competing with other forces in the struggle to define authentic Judaism in the twentieth century, to have Hebrew as the official language of Ramah was an additional yoke around our necks. The importance of Hebrew is far from self-evident, and today Hebrew is on the wane even in some day schools. If you can acquire the same ideas in translation, why go through all the trouble of studying a whole new language?

At Ramah we believed that Jewish education, effectively carried out, would result in young people who were deeply rooted in their tradition through their attachment to Jewish texts, which they could now grapple with because they had already mastered the necessary skills. Once you introduce students into the *method*, anyone can join the ongoing conversation. In our tradition, there is no way around it: The method must involve Hebrew.

But it's also possible to go too far, to stress Hebrew so much that you err in the other direction. In some Jewish communities, such as Mexico and Argentina, there are schools where Hebrew has become the main goal of Jewish education, and content is secondary. While Hebrew is essential, it is not sufficient. You need several other components — *mitzpot*, prayer, and a communal consciousness on several levels: one's immediate community, the extended Jewish community, one's national society, and the world at large. At Ramah we tried to bring all of these components together.

I regarded these five men — Louis Finkelstein, Saul Lieberman, Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Hillel Bavli — as our teachers. I spent hours talking with them, and to some extent I saw my mission as one of serving as the conduit between this older generation and the next.

*I*deas into Action: *The Melton Faculty Seminar*

In addition to these five professors, Ramah was also influenced by the Melton Faculty Seminar, which discussed and debated the essential principles that would guide the camp. The Seminar, which ran through the late 1950s and 1960s, included some of the younger scholars at the Seminary, such as Walter Ackerman, Chaim Brandwein, Gerson Cohen, Sylvia Ettenberg, Lloyd Gartner, Avraham Holtz, Joel Kraemer, Morton Leifman, Shmuel Leiter, Yochanan Muffs, Louis Newman, Fritz Rothschild, Nahum Sarna, and David Weiss Halivni. To the best of my knowledge, the Melton Faculty Seminar was the longest ongoing deliberation on Jewish education in the United States.

Essentially we tackled two fundamental questions. First, what were the motifs, the essential themes that we wanted the camper to internalize through the Ramah experience? And second, what were the best ways to realize these goals?

We gradually arrived at a consensus on various points, and we formulated concepts that are still in use today. There was a productive dialogue between the ideas of these scholars and their application at Ramah. A professor might teach an exciting course at the Seminary, and the following summer his students

would be teaching it at Ramah — to the staff, or perhaps even to the older campers.

The Seminar was always asking: What is the relevance of this particular Jewish idea, and when and how should it be taught? Some of these Seminar scholars taught at Ramah, because it was a place where you could not only be excited by ideas, but could witness their application in real-life situations. In fact, it was taboo to treat theory and practice as separate domains.

Ideas in Creative Tension

Two of the Seminary professors you mentioned, Heschel and Kaplan, had such different outlooks that they're generally seen as representing opposite poles of contemporary Jewish theology. Did these differences lead to problems in a camp that was searching for a clear religious ideology?

No, because from the start Ramah recognized that Judaism is too complex to be guided by a single perspective. Within a philosophical system, an eclectic approach can be problematic because philosophers strive for coherence. But while Ramah was guided by ideas, it was also a practical place where ideas were put into action, and where an eclectic approach could provide a rich source of energy. The fact that both ends of the theological spectrum were represented at Ramah added intellectual tension and excitement.

The Seminary professors who served as mentors represented differing and sometimes conflicting ideas. But their various approaches had already managed to coexist within the framework

of the Seminary. Ramah tried, and was often able, to take their different conceptions a step further by building a society that was guided by a similar multiplicity of visions. Fortunately, the people embodying these various visions were willing to affirm that all of us had far more in common than not.

But even when there is agreement on the fundamental principles of Judaism, there are inevitable differences as to how those fundamentals should be combined. Dr. Yochanan Muffs, a Seminary Bible scholar, once pointed out that the three basic principles of Judaism set forth in *Pirke Avot* [*Ethics of the Fathers*, an accessible and well-known section of the Talmud] — Torah, *avodah*, and *g'millut chasadim* [study, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness] — while mutually supportive and reinforcing, are not always in harmony with each other.

Focus exclusively on the study of Torah, and the result will be disembodied intellects, which was precisely what concerned the Musarists. Focus only on prayer, and you risk becoming excessively inner-directed, which can lead to reclusiveness, removal from the world, and a passivity that is inconsistent with mainstream Judaism. Finally, *mitzvah* on its own can lead to a simplistic and mechanical pattern of observance. Piety is a beautiful thing if you're living in an uncomplicated world, but that's not our reality. The answer is to try to integrate these three forces so that they all form part of the same picture.

The Educational Ideas behind Ramah

We've looked at the major Jewish influences on Ramah, but that's only part of the story. Ramah also made extensive use of experts from the worlds of general education and the social sciences.

Because what we were trying to create required a wider range of expertise, we decided to supplement the Seminary faculty by inviting some of the leading scholars in the humanities, social sciences, and education to join us. We were determined to have the worlds of general and Jewish education “interpenetrate.” The additional scholars who formed the Melton Advisory Board included some of the most thoughtful, creative minds in the field, such as Goodwin Watson, the social psychologist; Fritz Redl, the psychoanalyst; Ralph Tyler, Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, and a powerful force in American education; and Lawrence Cremin, the eminent historian of education.

Two of the scholars in this group were especially important to Ramah: Joseph Schwab, the prominent philosopher of education and curriculum theorist, and Bruno Bettelheim, the renowned psychoanalyst, who regarded Ramah as a marvelous experiment. I had written my doctoral thesis about Freud and education under the guidance of both men at the University of Chicago.

The members of our Advisory Board were not paid for participating. They were attracted to Ramah by the scope of the project and were excited by the idea of being part of it. They were also impressed by how serious we were about training educational leaders. Professor Schwab even came to camp before the campers arrived to lead seminars for the staff.

Recently, somebody asked me what motivated these high-profile professors — some with little or no interest in Judaism, others who were not even Jewish — to contribute so much of their time and energy to Ramah. The answer, I think, has to do with scholars’ wish for immortality, which occurs when people read their books and put their ideas into practice. Schwab not only generated ideas; he lived to see them acted upon at Ramah, at Melton, and many other places. What we offered these scholars, as well as the Judaic

scholars on the Faculty Seminar, was a living laboratory in which to try out their ideas. Somehow we were able to inspire in them a confidence that the various plans and ideas we discussed around the conference table would actually materialize. What was talked about in November was often part of the camp's program the following summer. Moreover, we never undertook a project without first discussing it with them and paying close attention to their comments. We were giving these scholars an unusual opportunity — the possibility of making a real impact on a society.

Schwab, in particular, viewed Ramah as an ideal place to create disciples. Certainly he was the most important force in shaping my own ideas about education.

Could you say more about him? Schwab seems to have been the key figure in this group, but his name is not well-known today.

Joseph Schwab was born in a small town in Mississippi, where the entire Jewish community consisted of half a dozen families. Although he grew up knowing little about Judaism, he became intrigued by certain Jewish concepts, such as *mitzvah*. He devoted a great deal of his time to Ramah; between 1952 and 1966 I spent at least two days a month with him. He helped us think through issues such as the connection between the cognitive (intellectual) and the affective (emotional) aspects of education. There was a natural fit between his ideas and our vision.

I should explain that Ramah was built on the belief that you have to make contact with young people on all levels — the intellectual, the emotional, the spiritual, and the aesthetic. Some people are touched by music, while others are tone-deaf. Some will respond especially to prayer, or to Shabbat, or to social justice, or to the intellectual challenge in the rabbinic commentaries, or to theology.

Ideally, of course, youngsters will respond to several or even all of the many components within Judaism. Our tradition offers a great deal, and the mind is not the only means of access to it.

In an essay entitled “Eros and Education,” Schwab argued that the human mind is not only cerebral but also passionate, and that the intellect is not an emotion-free area. He also believed there were hardly any emotional areas that did not include cognitive elements. Schwab was convinced that for education there was no meaningful distinction to be drawn between mind and body, or between intellect and emotion.

Schwab wrote in that essay that Eros was all about “the energy of wanting.” He believed that the definition of “to know” had to include “to do.” The aim of education, he said, was to produce “*actively* intelligent people,” whom he described in this way:

They *like* good pictures, good books, good music, good movies. They *find pleasure* in planning their active lives and carrying out the planned action. They hanker to make, to create, whether the object is knowledge mastered, art appreciated, or actions patterned and directed. In short, a curriculum is not complete which does not move the Eros, as well as the mind of the young, from where it is to where it might better be.

We also consulted with Schwab on how best to teach traditional Jewish texts. This was familiar territory for him because at the college of the University of Chicago nobody used textbooks, only primary sources. We spent hours with him discussing, for example, how best to teach adolescents the story of Jacob, Rebecca, and Isaac in the Book of Genesis. As presented in the text, Jacob and Rebecca can be viewed as scheming co-conspirators against Isaac. Jacob is deceitful, his mother is less than honest, and together they mislead poor Isaac into giving the birthright to Jacob instead of to Esau, the first-born.

How do you explain what is at stake here — the future of the people of Israel? How can you help adolescents discover that what appears to be a story about personal gain, about acquiring the birthright and its privileges, is actually a story about the future of the Jewish people: Which of Isaac's sons is qualified to forge a nation? How can you teach teenagers to consider the idea that a great leader can have great flaws, a persistent theme in the Torah? How do you convey to them that there are often shades of gray, when adolescents tend to see only black and white?

This is a tremendous challenge, and we discussed it with Schwab at length. Freud wrote in *Civilization and its Discontents* that the way most educators prepare young people for the world is the intellectual and moral equivalent of sending explorers on a polar expedition outfitted in summer clothing. How do you tell young people the truth about the world without doing damage to their innate idealism and hope?

Schwab was also involved in our work in leadership education. If you look at how leadership training has evolved in recent years, you will see two main schools of thought. The British school says: Study the greats. Plato, Aristotle, and John Locke will provide you with all the principles you will need. Alfred North Whitehead claimed that everything he had ever required to live the good life he found in the Bible and the literature of ancient Greece.

The American model, as you may expect, is more directly pragmatic. The Harvard Business School says: If we can provide enough case studies that illustrate the principles and include the situations you are likely to encounter during your career, you will succeed in the real world.

Schwab helped us develop a third conception, which was essentially a blend of the other two and which fit in perfectly with the

goals of Ramah: Teach young people the principles that have guided your tradition, and give the students exercises in analyzing practice in view of these principles. They must then ask themselves: If I acquire, accept, and understand these principles, what will my practice be like?

What was the contribution of Bruno Bettelheim?

First, I must say that although Bettelheim's reputation has been challenged in recent years, that in no way diminishes his important contribution to Ramah. Second, although some members of the Melton Advisory Board responded to Ramah in terms of their Jewish background, that wasn't the case with Bettelheim, who regarded Judaism and all religions as anachronistic. And yet he clearly appreciated what we were trying to do educationally.

As a graduate student at the University of Chicago I had worked at Bettelheim's Orthogenic School for emotionally disturbed children. Once, with the chutzpah of youth, I said to him that the school didn't always measure up to his descriptions of it in his book, *Love is Not Enough*.

"You're right," he replied. "The book outlines what the school was *supposed* to be." He acknowledged that it often fell short of its vision, but that didn't mean it wasn't guided and directed by that vision.

One of the distinguishing marks of Bettelheim's school was its creation of a "home haven," a comfortable and safe setting for the children. To make this happen, Bettelheim used every resource at his disposal — from architecture to food. We believed that a camper's cabin at Ramah should function in a similar way, as a supportive environment against the inevitable pressures and problems created by an intense milieu. Bettelheim helped us understand how best to bring this about.

We were influenced by Bettelheim when we asked that each camp director show us the menu for the first few days of the summer. We wanted to make sure that all our camps were serving familiar foods like hamburgers — foods that would facilitate the smoothest possible transition from a youngster's home to this new environment. We also made sure that we were prepared to provide as many additional helpings as a camper wanted, so that nobody would leave the table feeling hungry, especially during the first week. We even had the counselors serve extra snacks at night. We were a bit extreme when it came to food, especially with all those Freudians on our board!

Another lesson I learned from Bettelheim was the significance of the school custodian, who, for some students, was a more significant educational figure than the teachers or other professionals. At Ramah we paid close attention to the character of all the people we hired, not only the counselors, specialists, and teachers, but the service staff as well. Many of our dishwashers were students from Ivy League colleges. They didn't know Hebrew, but they wanted to be at Ramah and would accept any job in order to spend a summer at camp. We responded by giving them the best teachers, including, quite often, the professor-in-residence.

Bettelheim stressed the distinction between education and therapy — that while education could be enormously therapeutic, we shouldn't confuse the two. He also taught us that there ought to be a place in camp where campers could be wild and noisy, and another place where a youngster could find peace and quiet. And it was Bettelheim who introduced me to the distinguished Harvard psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson. In his biographies of Martin Luther and Gandhi, Erikson portrayed charismatic individuals as unreconstructed adolescents who continued to believe that the world could be changed and that history was

reversible. This was an idea educators needed to hear, and before long, Erikson's books were being read and discussed at Ramah.

Finally, Bettelheim helped us understand that we had a tremendous built-in advantage that we hadn't fully been aware of: Because Ramah was in opposition to American suburban values, the camp was inherently countercultural in a way that was attractive and yet constructive to adolescents in rebellion against their elders.

A Philosophical Commitment to Excellence

It seems to me that during its earlier years, Ramah was unapologetically elitist in a way that might not be acceptable these days.

Back then, of course, elitism was a commonly shared assumption, and nobody questioned it. It was a necessary consequence of a commitment to excellence. The Seminary sought out great scholars and the best possible students, and to a large degree it succeeded. Ramah wasn't open to everybody. It was often difficult to get in, and there were waiting lists. We believed that if you invested in the right people, they could change the world. We believed that with talent and hard work, anyone could make it to the top. But we also believed there *is* a top.

From Theory to Practice

We've looked at some of the intellectual background that helped create Ramah. I'd be interested in how some of the ideas and principles that came up in the Melton Faculty Seminar were ultimately expressed in practice.

Obviously, the leap from the theoretical to the practical is a big one. How do you fill the enormous gap between a text, the internalization of its message, and its incorporation into behavior? How do you move from mastering an idea to living it? And how does your practical experience affect your theory and help you revise it?

Although we didn't articulate it in exactly these terms, we were working with a process that involved five levels.

The first level is philosophy, and it asks theoretical questions. What is your conception of Judaism, of an ideal Jewish society, and of the individual? What is your conception of knowledge? Does knowledge consist of a mastery of facts? Of basic principles? If you know, will you therefore do?

The second level narrows the scope to the philosophy of education. How does your philosophy guide your conception of education? In our case, how do your ideas about Judaism shape the vision of what education should or can be?

The third level deals with the theory of practice, and takes the process one step further. How does your philosophy of education shape and alter your educational goals? How does it shape your conception of curriculum, or of teacher education, or of informal education?

The fourth level brings the discussion to actual practice: pedagogy, in-service education, and classroom management.

The fifth level consists of monitoring and evaluation, which serves as a corrective for each and all of the levels.

But these levels are not linear, and you need not move from Level One to Level Five. Some of the most effective work in education begins with Level Five — with a careful, critical look at your ongoing program, which often demonstrates that you may not be

accomplishing what you set out to do. This may lead you to reexamine your practice or your philosophy of education, which may in turn lead you to reconsider your basic assumptions about Judaism and knowledge. In other words, you return to Level One.

In our discussions about Ramah, we often started from Level Four and then moved on to Levels One through Five. Moving from theory to practice, or from practice to theory, is a dynamic process that forces you to constantly observe, rethink, and — ideally — change and improve.

These distinctions are still somewhat theoretical and abstract. Could we look at a specific area, such as *t'fillah* [prayer], in light of these five levels?

If you are considering how to deal with *t'fillah* in an educational setting, the five levels might apply as follows:

Level One: What is prayer? Why do we praise God, who clearly doesn't need our praise? One answer, suggested by Maimonides, is that God is a role model. When we praise God for being merciful, we do so in order to articulate and emulate that particular quality. If we restricted our discussion to this sort of issue, we would have a philosophical treatment of prayer.

Level Two might ask: What is the role of prayer in your philosophy of education? What specific ideas about it do you want to convey to children? How do you make contact with the spirituality of a child?

With Level Three we move into ideas that will guide educational practice. Can these ideas be taught to younger children? You might decide that you really can't accomplish much in this area until you make people sensitive to words, because the whole assumption of prayer is that reading or chanting certain words will set off something inside you. Or you might ask whether

meditation fits into your understanding of Jewish prayer. And if it does, how will you teach it?

Actually, that last question brings us to Level Four, which deals with pedagogy. How, in the classroom, will teachers help students develop a sensitivity to words or to *nusach* [the traditional chant of the prayer service]? How will teachers be trained to carry out these assignments?

Level Five asks: As you monitor this activity, how will you make the necessary changes as a result of what you observe or learn? Does your experience support your theory?

As long as we're talking about prayer, could you explain why, given the general intellectual openness of Ramah, it was mandatory for campers to attend services every morning?

In order to reject something you first need to experience it, and at Ramah you could experience religious services under optimal conditions. As Schwab used to say about music, the sonata form isn't something you immediately respond to. It takes hard work and experience before you appreciate it. Similarly, for *t'fillah* to succeed you have to work at it and experience it. Eventually it becomes meaningful — or it doesn't. Rejection is always an option, as long as it's thoughtful and considered.

We believed that most young people who experienced Judaism at Ramah would become deeply involved in it. Of course, all education works on that premise. If you are introduced to a profound idea by a fine teacher in the right environment, there's a good chance you'll accept it. This is a faith assumption of education.

But while *Shacharit* [morning] services were compulsory at Ramah, afternoon services were not. This was an important

difference between Ramah and the Seminary. *Halakhically*, the *Minchah* service is also compulsory, but there were limits as to how much the uninitiated camper could be expected to understand and appreciate. After all, the majority of these youngsters had never experienced any daily prayers. Our educational analysis made it clear that if we insisted on *Minchah* at camp, we were likely to lose much of the impact of *Shacharit*.

In the end, the Seminary faculty voted for an optional *Minchah* at Ramah, basing the decision on educational considerations rather than *halakhic* principles. It was a difficult debate, and ultimately the issue was decided by a single vote.

How did Ramah deal with the fact that even within the Conservative movement, not to mention the rest of Judaism, not everybody observes Shabbat in exactly the same way?

As we saw it, the camp's public space was to be maintained as a religious preserve. We didn't legislate against the use of a radio in the privacy of a cabin, for we made a distinction between the public space and private space. We enabled campers and staff alike to experience as close to a total Shabbat as possible within the public areas of the camp. As with the issue of *Minchah*, our policy allowing the private use of electricity rather than its public use was not a *halakhic* decision but an educational one.

On the other hand, many other practices and activities at Ramah were non-negotiable. These included Hebrew, daily classes, morning services, kashrut, the recitation of *birkat ha-mazon* [grace after meals] — and, in a very different sphere, instructional swim.

Let's return to the five levels that move us from the theoretical realm to the practical and back again. We've

already seen how they might apply to prayer. But what about a very different area, such as sports?

Level One would begin with general philosophical questions: What is the relationship between mind and body? Why do you need a healthy body? How is the conception of a healthy body in our tradition different from that of other traditions?

Then, in Level Two, you might ask: What is the role of sports in your conception of education? You might, as John Dewey did, discuss the importance of rules, fairness, cooperation and competition.

In Level Three you would think about what role sports might play in your program. Are you prepared to let a camper complete the summer with no significant athletic experiences? What about those campers who simply don't like sports? Or swimming?

In Level Four you might think about how you will teach respect for rules and fairness. How will you teach youngsters to be good losers — or good winners, for that matter? What are your methods of teaching these values?

And in Level Five you would take a critical look at your program and measure your accomplishments. Have your students internalized the values of fairness and good sportsmanship? What changes or improvements need to be introduced in your program?

That sounds fine, but almost every institution with aspirations to greatness makes grand claims about being guided by lofty theoretical principles. How do you ensure that there really is a link between those ideals and the real world?

If you develop your ideals carefully and thoughtfully, and you constantly reinforce the message that they really matter, you can

make those principles come alive. We once had a thirteen-year-old camper who used to wet his bed. We used to have late night staff meetings, but no matter what we were discussing, or how important it was, at 11:45 PM each night two counselors would rush to this boy's cabin and wake him up to make sure he went to the bathroom. If they arrived too late, they would wake him up and change his sheets so none of the other campers would be aware of the mishap when they woke up in the morning. The driving force here was the principle of *ha-malbin et p'nei chavero b'rabim* — that you must avoid a situation where a person might be embarrassed in front of others.

That brings to mind another case involving this same principle. We had a problem one summer with adolescent girls who, after lights out, would conduct “bull sessions” — discussions in which, under the rubric of self-improvement, each girl's faults and deficiencies would be addressed by the entire group. These sessions invariably ended with girls in tears, and with some of the girls being scapegoated.

I was the camp director that summer, and when this developed into a serious, continuing problem, I was tempted to outlaw these sessions. But I knew that the campers could continue holding bull sessions as soon as the counselor was out of earshot. When the situation finally got out of control, I came in to talk to the girls.

“We don't understand,” they told me. “We're just trying to help each other.”

“That sounds fine,” I said, “but may I sit in?” I started listening, and I soon found myself interrupting. “You know,” I told them, “I appreciate what you're doing. I accept your aims, but I have a problem with your method. One of the things we don't do in

a Jewish community like Ramah is publicly embarrass our fellow human beings. What if we studied a text together that deals with how people should behave toward one another, and then each girl can do her own self-evaluation privately?”

At this point, because an alternative was available, the more sensitive girls prevailed and the study session was accepted. Each night we studied the sixth chapter of *Pirke Avot* and discussed, among other things, what it means to be a *re'a ahuv* — an intimate friend, someone you could confide in, who would be supportive and would help you muster the strength you need to change and improve. We read this chapter every night for four weeks and had some very good talks. At Ramah, this sort of thing was part of the director's job definition.

Investing in Staff

It's interesting that the camp director would spend so much time with one cabin — but what about the rest of the staff? There were so many specialists in camp.

We weren't too concerned with conserving our resources! We had three full-time staffs at Ramah — counselors, specialists in sports and the arts, and teachers. Financially, of course, it was outrageous. There were no dual roles: Different people had different functions. This was part of the audaciousness of the place. We were trying to do it all.

The best specialist was somebody who pressured you and stretched you, and sometimes that led to problems for the camper. Whether in sports, music, drama, or any other area, competition and striving for excellence can cause problems. Classes were demanding, too, because the teacher would force

you to grapple with the text and stretch your mind. If there were problems, it was up to the counselor to pick up the pieces.

We also co-opted an idea from the kibbutz movement, which saw itself as an *edah mechanekhet* [an educating community], of having the teaching staff available throughout the day. The kibbutz teacher would teach a class in the morning and would continue to debate issues with you through the day. The same was true of our teachers — at least in theory.

An even more unusual position for a camp was that of the librarian, whose job was to sit in the library and be available all day to anyone, whether camper or staff member. And just as some camps have an artist-in-residence, each Ramah camp had a professor-in-residence, generally a Seminary faculty member whose role was to encourage intellectual ferment. He or she was there to listen, to teach, to prod, to criticize, and to help the camp community respond to *halakhic* problems that would invariably arise during the course of the summer.

Communal Leaders as Partners

Let's step back from the camp community to consider a constituency that is critical to the success of any educational institution. I'm referring to the communal leaders, who as board members assume ultimate responsibilities for the various camps.

Ramah, from its inception, was fortunate in recruiting outstanding communal leaders. While today, communal leaders are more supportive of good educational programs and more active in their support, that's a fairly recent development. In the 1970s and 1980s, most American Jews of status and means cared

mainly about Israel, hospitals, and defense organizations. Jewish education and culture ranked very low. Four notable exceptions were way ahead of their time and were interested in education: Sam and Florence Melton of Columbus, Philip Lown of Boston, and Leighton Rosenthal of Cleveland.

Now it's different. More and more, people are coming to realize that Judaism's and Israel's best asset is a Jewishly educated Diaspora, and that American Jews should be investing significantly in Jewish education. Fortunately, this view has prevailed, especially as part of the "continuity" agenda. Mort Mandel, who, with his brothers, Jack and Joe, established the Commission on Jewish Education in North America, helped launch this movement in a serious way. Jewish education has now been raised to the very top of the agenda of most Jewish organizations and institutions.

In general, communal leaders are more knowledgeable and insist on having a greater voice in the projects they support. In addition, we have major assets now that we didn't have then. There are academics and well-informed communal leaders all over North America who care about Jewish education and see it as important. Jewish studies courses in colleges and universities are one of the big success stories of American Jewish life. Families today can draw on a wide variety of programs. There are hundreds of day schools in North America and any number of excellent organized trips to Israel. There are young Jews in general education who are interested in making a contribution to Jewish education. There are Jewish leaders and philanthropists publicly proclaiming that Jewish education is a top priority. For all these reasons, I'm optimistic.

This may be the right moment to ask for your thoughts on what, for many would-be institution builders, is a difficult

and intimidating process, although it's essential if you're hoping to build or sustain a meaningful project. I'm referring, of course, to the whole question of fund-raising.

This may sound strange, but I firmly believe that money is not the biggest problem. Although funds have not always been easily available, these days there are enough resources to support a wide variety of fine projects.

The key factors in successful fund-raising are the strength of your ideas, your commitment to those ideas, and your enthusiasm. I have never asked anyone to support an institution unless I would have been willing to donate a similar amount if I had it. In other words, if you're not deeply committed to the cause, you shouldn't be trying to raise money for it. You have to start with vision and commitment, and you must convey them to the people you're approaching. And you have to *mean* it. I believe we're all transparent, and that as human beings we're continually judging each other and asking: "Is this person genuine? Is he sincere?"

Another thing: I always start with the assumption that the person I'm meeting with is at least as intelligent as I am. There's no inherent reason for him to support my project, because he has many other valid claims to consider. Therefore, it is my job to convince him — or, better still, to educate him. Only if you take the time to educate people about a project will they be able to make intelligent decisions about it. If you treat potential donors as people who can join *with* you and help you in creating this new enterprise, you may get somewhere.

Although the situation is far better than it used to be, the relationship between Jewish educators and communal leaders is still too adversarial. The professionals still ask: "How can this person make an informed judgment if he can't even read Hebrew?"

And the communal leaders still think: “This guy is a shlepper. If he were really successful, he’d be in my business.” This is unfortunate, but it’s true.

What are the biggest mistakes you see in fund-raising?

I see three common mistakes, and they’re connected. The first mistake is to treat the donor as if he or she were naive. The second mistake is arrogance. And the third one is not disclosing the full truth about the undertaking, including its problems and failures.

Here’s my favorite fund-raising story: Sam Melton was visiting Ramah in the Poconos, and one morning we passed a ten-year-old boy on his way to class.

“What are you studying?” Sam asked him.

“*Chumash*,” answered the boy.

“*Chumash* with what?” Sam asked.

And the boy replied, “*Chumash* with Melton.”

At that moment all my fund-raising efforts were vindicated.

How do you respond to those who ask why educational change takes so long and costs so much?

With this analogy: Would it make any sense to study mortality rates in surgical wards where the instruments weren’t sterilized? As long as teachers are often untrained or unmotivated, and certainly underpaid, what can you expect? When your mission is to conquer a disease, you don’t withdraw funding because you haven’t found a cure despite years of research. On the contrary: You invest additional money until you do. We have just begun doing that in Jewish education. It’s too early to ask whether the investment is too great, or whether it will take too long.

Vision vs. Budget

Still, there must be times when a well-developed educational vision and a prudent business plan are at odds with each other.

At Ramah that happened often. We couldn't always justify the educational investment on economic grounds, which was hard for some people to accept. Take the Mador program, in which we devoted an entire summer to the training of promising high school graduates who agreed to serve as counselors for two additional summers. From a purely economic standpoint it was foolish to invest so much money in that program. And what about the professor-in-residence and the camp librarian? These people were expensive! What other summer camp had three separate staffs? But when you give parents reason to believe that you're helping their child become a *mensch*, you can ask for a great deal.

When Ramah first started, we had to make a critical decision: Who would head the camps? Should it be an educator with vision who could then hire a talented business manager, or did we need a talented manager who would hire a creative director? The Seminary, in partnership with an outstanding board of communal leaders, decided that Ramah should be led by educators, by people with a vision. Each of the camps had a capable business manager, of course, and that job was vitally important, but the camp was always led by educators.

Where Ramah Failed

We've talked about some of Ramah's accomplishments, but as you said earlier, even if you start with cognac you'll

be lucky to end up with grape juice. Looking back on it, what are some of the areas where Ramah missed the boat?

I can identify five significant failures.

To begin with, we failed to conduct any systematic evaluation of our work. Ralph Tyler once told me that not doing this was the educational equivalent of not carrying out diagnostic tests until the patient was leaving the hospital. In other words, we often had no feedback on what we were doing until it was too late to do anything about it. If our results were really as promising as they seemed, we should have been documenting the evidence. It's amazing that, as far as I can determine, we never asked our campers to write about their experiences at Ramah! We were so busy building something new that we didn't ever stop to evaluate it.

Conducting a serious evaluation of an ongoing project is time-consuming and expensive, and it may sound like a luxury. Even today, when educational institutions embark on a self-evaluation, it's more likely to be used as a fund-raising technique rather than a way of improving the enterprise. But it's something we should have done.

Ramah's second failure was that, despite all our efforts, we never really became a Hebrew-speaking camp. Hebrew was a clearly articulated goal that was central to the philosophy of Ramah, and while Hebrew was the official language at camp, we simply didn't do well enough in this area. It's true that most of our counselors didn't know enough Hebrew, but that's no excuse. We could have taught them Hebrew in the off-season, perhaps in a series of regional centers. We could have sent them to Israel. But we did neither. We had no graduated curriculum for the teaching of Hebrew at Ramah. We had no language labs. We didn't even look

to Camp Massad for guidance in this area. We assumed they were successful at it only because Hebrew was their chief concern.

I must accept some of the blame for this failure. My attitude was: If there's a conflict between understanding ideas and learning the language, let's go for understanding. In the Melton Faculty Seminar, Gerson Cohen and Shmuel Leiter fought for more Hebrew — and they were right. So did Sylvia Ettenberg, whom I consider the great hero of Ramah, and who represents the only coherent continuation from the founding of the camp until her recent retirement, a span of forty-five years. She was both an anchor for communal leaders and a nurturer of directors. She was also a great facilitator and a peacemaker between warring factions.

On a related issue, I made a similar mistake with regard to Israel, which didn't always receive its rightful place on our agenda. On the other hand, the fact that hundreds of former Ramah campers now live in Israel suggests that we must have been doing something right in this area.

For years I did my best to keep Israelis out of our camps, because the Israelis I had met who wanted to work in an American summer camp seemed inappropriate as educators for Ramah. But eventually I joined those who decided to bring over an Israeli delegation every summer to serve as teachers and specialists. They turned out to make a real contribution.

Our third failure was in not establishing a year-round program. One reason we hired full-time camp directors was our expectation that they would maintain the camp program throughout the year by working with the Conservative movement's youth program, the Leadership Training Fellowship (LTF). The summer months could have served as the climax of the year, or perhaps the launch of a new year — or both. All the camps could have

been winterized. In this area we simply quit too early; the idea didn't advance far enough to merit being called a failure.

Our fourth failure was that we didn't establish a curriculum for the camp program as a whole. It's amazing, but we never formalized the various camp programs, although some of them were remarkable. There was some sharing of ideas among the camps, but not nearly enough. Over the years, we failed to document or preserve any number of innovative and creative projects. There was far too much reinventing of the wheel and too much improvising. At least this failure was deliberate: We were afraid of formalizing what we had because it might have inhibited creativity. But this was a mistake.

The fifth failure that comes to mind was that we didn't achieve an effective transition between the rarefied atmosphere of Ramah and the camper's home community, despite the fact that we paid a lot of attention to this problem and were probably on the right track. For example, we often discussed how to help campers, newly excited about Jewish practice, who return to a non-kosher or otherwise non-observant household. Because we respected the campers' family relationships, we did not encourage them to tell their parents what they should or shouldn't eat, or do, in their own homes.

But more often than we anticipated, the reentry problems arose not with the campers' families but with their synagogues. After a summer at Ramah, campers found it hard to return to a service that suddenly seemed stilted and complacent, and to a rabbi who seemed formal when contrasted with the informality and warmth of camp. We even had youngsters who refused to attend synagogue services after camp because the service no longer felt authentically Jewish to them.

In a sense we were creating misfits, but we were arrogant enough to think our campers could turn the Conservative movement around. And they did, to some extent, although it took years.

Unexpected Successes

In addition to the successes we worked hard for, we had a few others that we hadn't really anticipated. Many Ramah campers went on to become rabbis, professors of Judaica at American and Israeli universities, or prominent community leaders. Today, Ramah graduates are extremely well represented in professional Jewish life and in institutions of Jewish culture and education — in all denominations. And a great many others have made aliyah.

Second, we recruited and developed our own personnel. That is, much of our staff consisted of former campers. We had some terrific directors, and most of them, too, came up through the ranks. We made sure they were decently paid, and we created a new Jewish profession: camp director. These people were given tenure, just like university faculty. Being a Ramah director was a difficult job that involved dealing with a variety of groups, such as staff, campers, parents, rabbis, educators, and communal leaders, not to mention such complex issues as religious ideology and finance. Most of our directors had been trained as rabbis, which meant they had a clear and obvious career line, usually in the pulpit, but sometimes in formal education or Jewish communal life. At Ramah they were really going out on a limb in terms of their future careers — some of them for years, and others for their entire professional lives.

Despite our failures, Ramah worked. I've been in the Jewish education business a long time, and nowhere else have I seen a

closer correlation between what we set out to do and what we actually accomplished. The ultimate proof, of course, are the campers. They may have hated Hebrew school, but they really learned, loved, and lived Judaism at Ramah.

They also loved and appreciated the *people* at Ramah. I have no idea how many deep and lasting friendships began at Ramah, but there have been a great many. And many marriages, too. All over North America and Israel, you can find young people whose parents — and increasingly, *grandparents* — met each other at Ramah.

Lessons for New Institutions

What would you identify as the most significant lessons that other institutions might learn from Ramah?

First, Ramah demonstrates how a vision can motivate a staff, and how a staff can then stretch itself. Second, I think there is something to be learned about how to combine sophisticated approaches to content and theoretical discussions with the most concrete and mundane nitty-gritty details.

Ramah was also about investing in talent, and the vital importance of communal supporters. In our case, the communal leaders protected us from attempts to dilute the educational component. They believed in the project because they understood it, and they acted out of deep conviction. Ramah made it possible for educators, rabbis, scholars, and communal leaders to join forces. There was a real generosity of spirit and a genuine attempt to understand the other person's position. Ramah was more than a camp; it was an educational movement.

The success of Ramah empowered some of us to think about institutions that didn't exist, and that *still* don't exist. At some point we will probably see the creation of institutions that combine the day school with the community center, breaking down the conventional walls between formal and informal education. Just as the students of John Dewey hoped to produce an active participant in a democratic society, such an institution, when it finally comes into existence, will serve as an intensive training ground for Jewish citizenship.

The next challenge, in my view, is to provide for the needs of post-materialist people. More and more, people are looking for meaning in their lives. They want to know what our tradition is all about, and our job is to take that tradition and present it in contemporary terms that speak to them. From time to time a genius will emerge, a Heschel or a Kaplan, but you can't sit back and wait for them. It's far better, in my view, to build places where potential Heschels and Kaplans will be nurtured, develop, and flourish.

Bibliography

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- Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and The High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995).

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Vision: For Jewish education

Some examples of the power of ideas for Jewish education are found in:

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- Gerson D. Cohen, "From Scholarship to Paideia: A Case Study," in *From the Scholar to the Classroom: Translating Jewish Tradition into Curriculum*, edited by Seymour Fox and Geraldine Rosenfeld (New York: Melton Center for Research in Jewish Education at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977), pp. 31-58.

Israel Scheffler and Isadore Twersky have helped me understand the significance of vision for Jewish education and for general education. I am grateful to Professor Twersky for disclosing the visions of Jewish education of Maimonides and Brisk; and to Professor Scheffler for analyzing the vision of John Dewey and for his suggestions concerning leadership education. Their ideas, as well as my own, will appear in a forthcoming publication:

- *Visions of Learning: Variant Conceptions of Jewish Education*, edited by Seymour Fox and Israel Scheffler with the assistance of Daniel Marom, to be published by the Mandel Institute, Jerusalem, Israel.

Camp Ramah and its History

- *The Ramah Experience: Community and Commitment*, edited by Sylvia Ettenberg and Geraldine Rosenfeld (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America in cooperation with The National Ramah Commission, 1983). The chapter by Burton I. Cohen, "A Brief History of the Ramah Movement," presents the history of Ramah; however, the entire book is of importance for those who wish to gain a perspective on the theory and practice of the Ramah movement.

The Relationship of the Cognitive and Emotional Domains for Education

Joseph Schwab and Israel Scheffler have written key essays on this topic:

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The Practical

Joseph Schwab has made a key contribution to our thinking concerning the practical nature of the field of education. His ideas were developed in four monographs:

- The Practical I — “The Practical: A Language for Curriculum” (Washington D.C.: National Education Association, 1970).
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- Israel Scheffler, in his volume *Four Pragmatists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), particularly in his chapter on John Dewey, presents a penetrating analysis of the means-ends relationship for the field of education.

An Understanding of the Adolescent

Our thinking was very much influenced by the writings of two psychoanalysts, Eric H. Erikson and Bruno Bettelheim.

Erikson’s paper on youth and his books on Luther and Gandhi helped us understand the thinking and feeling of the adolescent, as well as the concept of charisma:

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- *Gandhi’s Truth: On Origins of Militance and Violence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).
- Bruno Bettelheim’s volume on the Orthogenic School, *Love is Not Enough* (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1950), was carefully studied and applied to the camp setting.



The Melton Center for Research in Jewish Education

The Melton Center was established in 1960 at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, by Samuel M. Melton of Columbus, Ohio, and plays a key role in the development of the theory and practice of Jewish education. The Melton program for the teaching of Bible was piloted at the Ramah camps. The Melton Faculty Seminar developed the papers that guided much of the educational thinking at Ramah.

During the years of my direct involvement with the Melton Center, Louis Newman served as its director. Joseph Schwab was the leading

educational consultant to the Center. The reader may find some of the publications of the Melton Center of interest, particularly:

- Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America and McGraw Hill, 1966).
- Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus: Part 1* (New York: Behrman House, 1969).



The Mandel Institute

The Mandel Institute is an international center for the study and development of Jewish and general education. It was established in Jerusalem in 1990 by Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel of Cleveland, Ohio. It has been at the forefront of the movement to revitalize Jewish education. Among its publications are:

- Seymour Fox and Israel Scheffler, "Jewish Education & Jewish Continuity: Prospects & Limitations" (Jerusalem: The Mandel Institute, 1996).



From 1988 to 1990, the Mandel Associated Foundations, the JCC Association, and JESNA in collaboration with CJF convened the Commission on Jewish Education in North America. Its recommendations were published in:

- *A Time to Act: The Report of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America* (Lanham-New York-London: University Press of America, 1991).

One of these recommendations was the establishment of the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (CIJE).



The Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (CIJE)

CIJE is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to the transformation of North American Jewish life through education. Among CIJE's publications are those of The Best Practices Project in Jewish Education, directed by Barry W. Holtz.

- *Best Practices: Supplementary School Education* (New York-Cleveland: CIJE, 1993, 1996) argues the case for the centrality of vision to models of excellence in this setting.

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I was invited to join the staff of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin in 1950 by Louis Newman, the director, and Sylvia Ettenberg, dean of students at the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary. As a result of their invitation, I spent eighteen wonderful years in a close association with the Ramah movement and have continued to watch it grow and flourish since then.

From 1950 to 1968, I was privileged to work with the staff and the leaders of the Ramah movement: the camp directors, Levi Soshuk, Rabbi David Mogilner, and Rabbi Marshall Meyer, all of blessed memory; and Rabbi Jerome Abrams, Dr. Walter Ackerman, Donald Adelman, Dr. Raphael Arzt, Dr. Burton Cohen, Rabbi Morton Leifman, Dr. Shmuel Leiter, Dr. David Lieber, Dr. Joseph Lukinsky, Louis Newman, Dr. Chaim Potok, Rabbi Moshe Samber, and Dr. Morton Siegel.

Following Bernard Resnikoff, David Mogilner and subsequently Burton Cohen were appointed directors of the National Ramah Commission, where each offered outstanding leadership to the movement as a whole. In 1989, Dr. Sheldon Dorph assumed the position of director; he is guiding Ramah with inspiration from its fiftieth anniversary into the future.

I learned a great deal from all of them.

Ramah was a partnership of educators, communal leaders, rabbis, and scholars. I have not written a history of Ramah and therefore cannot acknowledge many other people with whom I was fortunate to work. I must, however, mention Lou Winer, who, as a communal leader, was a source of continuous support and encouragement to the camp directors. Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, as executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly from 1952 to 1989, helped us develop a common language with the rabbis, who contend with the reality of building Jewish life twelve months a year.

A *about the Authors*

Seymour Fox, who was closely associated with Camp Ramah from 1950 to 1968, is president of the Mandel Institute in Jerusalem, an international center for the study and development of Jewish and general education.

Professor Fox was born in Chicago in 1929. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and his rabbinical ordination from The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. In 1954, he became director of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, the first Ramah camp. After serving in various other capacities at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he became dean of its Teachers Institute in 1959. In that year he founded the Mador program of Camp Ramah. In 1960, he founded the Melton Center for Research in Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

He moved to Israel in 1966 and was appointed Professor of Education and director of the School of Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1969, he founded the Hebrew University's Melton Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora. He has served as a senior consultant to four Ministers of Education.

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William Novak spent ten years at Ramah camps in Canada, the Poconos, and Glen Spey, N.Y., where he was, at various times, a camper, a counselor, a music specialist, and a teacher. Novak is a

former editor of the journals *Response* and *New Traditions* and was one of the founders of *Moment* magazine. He is also the co-editor of *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*.

As a writer, he has worked with a number of celebrities on their memoirs, including Lee Iacocca (*Iacocca*), Tip O'Neill (*Man of the House*), Magic Johnson (*My Life*), and Natan Sharansky (*Fear No Evil*).

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